

The Secular Experience of God

By Kenneth Cragg.

Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International

Leominster UK: Gracewing, 1998 Pp.viii+82 (pb).

Kenneth Cragg, former Assistant Bishop in the Jerusalem Archbishopric and scholar of Islam, has contributed a volume to a series entitled *Christian Mission and Modern Culture*. This series appears designed to take up the appeal of the late Lesslie Newbigin for Christian thinkers to challenge the displacing of Christian faith by the Western secularist view of the world. Cragg has entitled his succinct contribution *The Secular Experience of God*.

Cragg is a writer who chooses his titles with care. This book fulfills what the title promises. It enters sympathetically and imaginatively into the *experience* of secularists – those formative insights and cumulative impressions life makes on persons whose view of the world omits anything that transcends this world. Cragg thinks that the secular experience of God is seldom a tranquil indifference or ignoring of God. More often, he thinks, “secularity is not indifferently rid of God” (2). Rather, the secular experience has varied textures, including “liberation, desolation, loss, gain, confusion, panic, or quietude.”

It is characteristic of Cragg to use a word and intend us to hold in our minds more than one simultaneous meaning. In the case of his word “experience”, he wants us also to think of the Latin sense of *experientia*, being put to the test. He wants us to think about the engagement from God’s side as well. What is it for God to be denied, ignored, to become a matter of human indifference? What is God *experiencing* in the face of secular dismissal?

I. Cragg’s appreciation of secularity

One useful contribution Cragg offers is to distinguish between two quite different matters to which people often apply the terms “secularism” (or “secularity” or “secularization”). One is the religiously neutral state, for example the Republic of India, inaugurated in 1947 with its scrupulously neutral, *secular* constitution recognizing no special status for any religious community. Cragg argues that a secular government can be a good thing, particularly for minority religious communities which may hope for equal protection under secular government, but also for majority communities which may prosper, as in the United States, where membership is chosen and committed.

The other sense of “secularism” refers to human attitudes going beyond the realm of government to disavow transcendent goals or sanctions for any area of life – economic, family, or individual. This view adopts the words of the novelist Iris Murdoch: “We are on our own.” This is the view attributed by the Qur’an to pagans: “they live, think, and operate „to the exclusion of God“.” (51) Even this second, more sweeping and negative secularism is a view that Cragg is unwilling simply to denounce and decry.



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(I can speculate on the sources of Cragg's sympathy for the secularist. It may arise from the love he feels for members of his own family who have accepted this view of the universe; perhaps he has felt its power himself. I have noticed in other writings of Cragg regarding the human situation how often he uses the word "wistful". Or perhaps Cragg appreciates secularism by contrast with rigid, domineering, self-protective attitudes and behavior he has seen in religious groups who refuse to face the facts which secularists point out. Perhaps his sympathy arises from the practice of the lifelong missionary, seeking to understand his neighbor, so he can love his neighbor as God loves that neighbor.)

Whatever the personal sources of his sympathy for the secularist, Cragg sees the secularist view as arising from several accurate awarenesses:

1. Religions have on occasion claimed to have more adequate knowledge than they actually had, e.g., regarding the history of the earth and solar system, the history of the human species, or the interrelation between mind and body. Cragg of course insists that an overcorrection has occurred, when "techniques" displace providence; when things of this world become merely phenomena but not significant; and when human beings become inconsequential, and even our language arbitrary and without meaning.
2. Another source of secularism which Cragg takes seriously is the disappointment felt by sufferers in the face of evil, when previously they had relied on the consolations of the world's religions. Such disillusionment might seem to be a source peculiar to the Jewish and Christian milieu. In the face of massive manmade evil, who can believe that God is simultaneously powerful and loving?

I want to draw our attention now to two areas where Cragg offers rather different responses to these plausible, but wistful, God-forgetting views of the world. The first is the area of sex (chapter 3); the second is the management of religious plurality by governments (chapter 2).

II. Cragg pleads against secularism for a sacramental view of sex

In the area of sex, Cragg feels compelled to offer to the secular-minded a better, truer view of the place where, in his words, "nature and nurture most intimately meet to yield the first elements of culture".

(In his studies of the Qur'an and offering Christian response to Islam, I have noticed how often Cragg calls attention to our sexual nature as a sign of God's handiwork. So it is consistent with this longstanding appreciation of sex that in this area Cragg adopts a persuasive posture, attempting to urge right conclusions be drawn from a right theology of sex).

Cragg's essential argument is that sexuality is a sacrament. Sex comprises an outward and tangible sign plus an inward and spiritual gift. Our spirit needs our body to express itself; our bodies in sexual exchange impart the inner person. In Cragg's words (37), "Sexual exchange necessitates entire personal reciprocal imparting, exposure, donation, and reception – a unison of participation."

(To see that Cragg's sacramental view of sex is not shared universally, consider the report in the November 23, 1998 *Washington Post* of the Albuquerque man who filed a pre-emptive



lawsuit against the woman he had lived with and who had borne his child: he is suing her for becoming pregnant in breach of an oral contract, and of “intentionally acquiring and misusing” his semen when they had sexual intercourse.)

In Cragg’s view of sexual exchange, the man would have no grounds for suit, because in this act not just sperm or eggs but personality is given, and received. Christian marriage acknowledges this “unison of personality”. Christian marriage “hallows and fulfills” the loyalty meant and the perpetuation sought by sexual exchange.

Cragg writes succinctly and suggestively, not exhaustively or in complete syllogisms, about two of the aberrations from this sacramental appreciation of sex that we all know about and that trouble us. I mean divorce on the one hand and homosexual partnerships on the other.

Of divorce, Cragg writes (38): “there will always be a necessity to hold together the twin truths of a divinely meant sacramental love in couples, homes and families, and of divinely meant fulfillment, beyond frailty and guilt, of personalities in grace.”

Of homosexual relations, Cragg writes (38, next to last par.): “Faith must be its own mentor here and not turn only on Levitical precept... We need in this world all the love we can come by....” Cragg condemns zealous “outing”, on the grounds that platonic intermale or interfemale friendships are precious, both for society and for personhood. Yet he voices serious reservations about homosexual genital relations: 1) is this only mutual masturbation? 2) is there not always “a certain sterility”, a lack of “reciprocal gratitude for our place in the generations?” He also worries about “nonconsenting abuse”. In the end, he can only invoke the New Testament response to the classical world’s homosexual genital love by pointing to the meaning conferred on all physicality by the Incarnation. And what is that meaning? That our soul is a sanctuary and our body a temple of God. That the body is to be a “vessel of honor”, meet for the Lord’s use, and meet for the use of the self who is the Lord’s. Cragg concludes: “Sacramentality is an obedience of the will grounded in a love of the divine.”

Before I go on to the second area of life where Cragg has a proposal, namely how to manage a plurality of religions in public life, I wonder if we might like to pause here for some reaction. Cragg does not push his arguments through to a judgment. He leaves that to his readers. If I were to hazard an attempt to apply Cragg’s sacramental view of sex to the request that is being made to us today to honor same-sex unions with a dignity like that of marriage, I would be prompted to ask some questions. 1) Are such unions disposed to accept with gratitude their place in the generations, to transmit to the next generation the life that was once transmitted to us? 2) The other test question I would frame, perhaps mixing Cragg’s ideas with one of St. Paul’s images, has to do with parity and compatibility: Is this same-sex genital relationship one to which I can give myself when I also belong already to Jesus? Can the body of Christ be joined with this other body to which I desire to be joined? Or: is Christ who was willing that I should be joined to him willing also that I should be sexually united with another man? No doubt my use of Cragg’s sacramental principle with Paul’s idea of body is crude or flawed. I hope I have at least rightly grasped Cragg’s sacramental principle.



III. Cragg proposes a place for plural religions in public life

Sexuality according to Cragg lies at the heart of culture formation: in sexual exchange, nature meets nurture, self is embodied to join with self, life is transmitted, family is formed, and society builds itself up. Turning now to society in its larger units, Cragg is equally interested in the viability of the state and role that religions may hope to play in the face of secular attitudes and secular legal frameworks.

Cragg's deep knowledge of Islam and Christianity, plus his passing acquaintance with Hinduism, Buddhism, and African religion, leads him to pronounce (14): All religions show "an instinct to incorporate believing and to believe in incorporation." Religious experience preserves itself in rite, community, and in institution, including the state. In other words, every religion would like to be the established, state religion in the society where it is at home.

Thus Constantine's empire took over the Church, and the Church made itself at home in the empire. Muhammad (17) was "as it was his own Constantine": Pakistan and Saudi Arabia offer two current expressions of Islam's deep conviction that "religious faith assumes, desires, and proceeds by state-and power expression". Despite India's 1947 constitution declaring a religiously neutral state, Hinduism cannot avoid fusing creed with society, out of the deep conviction that the karmic order of the universe expresses itself in social caste. [Cf. Spouses' Book Club discussing today *The God of Small Things*: Christian community in Kerala is assimilated until it takes on the qualities of a caste.] (18) Despite the secular founding concepts of the state of Israel, Zionism has shaped the legal and political patterns of life there in "patterns [that] are sharply theocratic."

Religions may tend towards establishment, but two current forces contend against them. 1) Secular defenders of intellectual freedom and untrammelled technology demand that the state eschew any use of its powers to enforce devotional practices or ethical judgements. 2) The ptjer constraining force, of course, is rising religious plurality in nations that for much of their history had been essentially monoreligious – for example, Germany, France, the UK, and of course Australia, Canada and the USA as receivers of late-twentieth-century immigration. (some other nations have been multireligious for much longer.)

Question: Does a religiously neutral state have to foster a society that discounts, dismisses, and finally pushes all transcendent reference into oblivion? (Over the years the Faculty Book Club has pondered the views on this subject of Lesslie Newbigin, Stephen Carter, the theology faculty of the University of Birmingham, England in their collection *Dare We Speak of God in Public* as well as various historians and ethicists concerned with the status of religious thought in a religiously neutral, or religiously hostile, public arena.) Cragg is a bishop of the still, perhaps barely, established Church of England. He lived for a decade in the USA, cared as a chief pastor for Christian minority communities in the Middle East, and has frequently expressed the hope that Muslims may be learning a new lesson in



places like India, Europe, and North America where they cannot reasonably hope to gain sole control of the state. Cragg takes a hopeful view of the role religions can play in relation to religiously neutral states. At a very general level, Cragg believes a state can abstain from enforcing religion without either causing citizens to abandon religion or itself ceasing to be answerable for justice and probity. (I would submit that recent US history supports Cragg's belief: disestablished churches flourish here, multiply, split, and give way to new; in public life our leaders appeal to us on grounds of shared moral values to fight for democracy, against poverty, or for good behavior even in the personal lives of public officeholders.)

But what place in a religiously plural society may the several religious communities aspire to? Cragg proposes that whichever religious tradition is historically dominant in a country – that would be Christianity in the UK or USA, Islam in Egypt, etc. – that group should invite the minority traditions, whether long-time or newly immigrated, to collaborate with the dominant group in social service and join with it in debating current social problems.

Cragg knows better than most of us how different are some of the grounds of knowledge and the mental pictures of the universe and of ultimate reality which undergird the several religions. His awareness of difference does not deter Cragg from believing that political debate can be carried on, even if the debaters do not share identical premises or goals. I suspect that for a range of practical issues, like the contents of public-school textbooks and ending-of-life decisions, Cragg may be right. We probably can negotiate for livable, temporary arrangements, even as we all hold in our minds differing visions of the ultimate fulfillment we aspire to.

I do see one deeper problem which will not go away, even though we do not have to deal with it on a daily basis in our religiously plural societies. That is the question of the source of the state's authority to declare what shall be tolerated and to enforce coexistence. In most situations, dangerously intolerant groups will not have enough political strength to resist being judged aberrant and put out of existence by the state: for example, the Aum Supreme Truth group that released sarin nerve gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, or Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman sentenced to life imprisonment in 1996 for plotting to blow up the UN building,



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FBI offices, tunnels, and other landmarks in New York City. But what about when the group considered dangerous by the state turns out to be our group? Beneficial as the Pax Romana and its religious policy might have been for prosperity in many spheres of life, Christians in the first three centuries died protesting that the state could not be acknowledged as having authority to decide what religion is tolerable. Again in our times Christians are dying by reason of their faith. So I register this qualification on Cragg's hopefulness about the religiously neutral state.

IV. Conclusion

Kenneth Cragg leaves us in this book the testament of one still in awe of the Incarnation, as regards God, and still yearning that any and all persons –“all who will” – should come to the knowledge and love of God as that knowledge and love are ours in Christ. Yet the closing chapter (Chap. 5) speaks of the God of patience, the God willing to be left waiting at the door, the God who will not force an entry or demand a reply.

A Christian evangelist in a hurry – say Donald McGavran, or in a previous generation John R. Mott, or our own graduate Tad DeBordenave now in his prime as director of Anglican Frontier Missions – might find Cragg too patient. “Where is the harvest?” they might ask. Cragg's patience might be suspected to be only the rationalizations of a missionary who chose a notably barren, historically impenetrable mission field.

To such impatience, I would end with two replies. 1) Cragg has come to understand his vocation as being directed less to Muslim individuals than to Islam as a collectivity. And 2), as for patience, if we have personally experienced the gracious patience of God with us as individuals, is it not plausible to believe he may yet have something good in mind for the serious secularist and for the other religions? I for one am persuaded by Cragg to be expectant, to present Christ, and to be patient.

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1998; revised 12/17/09



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